# Political Stability in Authoritarian Regimes: Lessons from the Arab Uprisings

## Cecilia Emma Sottilotta

**Abstract**

History abounds with instances in which Western countries have pursued policies supporting authoritarian regimes, while lukewarmly investing in democracy promotion. The EU and US's attitudes *vis-à-vis* the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) region has followed this pattern. By looking at political discourse and practice, this paper explores the conceptual loopholes into which Western policy-makers have often fallen when choosing stability over democracy in the southern Mediterranean region. This paper focuses on US and EU attitudes towards MENA countries before and after the start of the Arab Spring with the goal of reappraising mainstream approaches to political stability amongst both governmental and non-governmental actors.

**Keywords**: *Middle East / North Africa / Arab spring / Domestic policy / Authoritarianism / Political stability / Democracy promotion / European Union / United States*

# Political Stability in Authoritarian Regimes: Lessons from the Arab Uprisings

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## 1. Political stability: a multifaceted concept

Few today would question that the Arab Spring represents a critical juncture in the history of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Equally irrefutable is the fact that the Arab Spring is leading to a policy re-adjustment by both the United States (US) and the European Union (EU). Opinions on how this re-adjustment will unfold abound, but one fact is incontrovertible: political turmoil in the MENA was largely unexpected.

Admittedly, predicting abrupt political change is always a difficult task, strongly influenced by the way in which analysts and policy-makers conceptualize and assess political stability.[1] Both the US and the EU - each in its own way - have pursued their policies in the Arab world and elsewhere on the basis of specific beliefs about the elements underpinning the stability of non-democratic regimes. Much as their policies, the beliefs on which those policies were based also seem to be in need of an upgrade.

Stability is desirable for a vast array of reasons, particularly because it provides external players with the advantage of dealing with a government whose actions are predictable (at least to some extent). From the vantage point of the policy-maker, dealing with a failed or failing state is a daunting scenario, in which it is difficult to identify a counterpart to interact with and where the uncertainty ascribable to state weakness is maximized. It comes as no surprise, then, that several governments make a constant effort at getting as accurate an understanding as possible of the risks threatening the stability of third states.[2]

Yet, these efforts do not always produce the desired results. The problems linked to the risk management of instability are well exemplified by Western policies towards the MENA region, historically an extremely sensitive area for geopolitical as well as economic reasons. Before and after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US, the Western world sought a close partnership with supposedly moderate Arab governments to keep political Islam (considered to pursue an agenda hardly compatible with Western views) at bay, contain tensions between Arab states and Israel, secure energy supplies, and fight Islam-rooted terrorism. In this context, Western policies in the MENA region have largely rested on a specific idea of political stability which, in the wake of the Arab

Spring, it is time to unpack. In so doing, we might get a better understanding of what was missed, and what changes or integrations might help avoid strategic surprises in the future.

If one looks at the various and diverse definitions of "political stability", it is immediately evident that the concept is rather controversial.[3] A first, broad definition refers to the *absence of domestic civil conflict and widespread violence*. In this sense, a country can be considered rid of instability when no systematic attacks on persons or property take place within its boundaries. Such definition is problematic, since the political situation of a certain country can look stable in a given moment (meaning that no systematic attacks on persons or property are taking place) notwithstanding the fact that the regime may be very fragile. A classic example in this sense is US President Jimmy Carter's praising of pre-revolutionary Iran for being "an island of stability in one of the more troubled areas of the world"[4] while spending New Year's Eve in 1977 with the Shah. At that time few would have imagined what happened in that country less than two years later.

Another classic interpretation equates stability with *government longevity*. A serious problem with this definition is that a country experiencing frequent changes of government is considered unstable, even when continuity in governmental policies is maintained by a relatively stable administrative system in which institutional norms are well embedded. According to this criterion, Italy, which experienced more than sixty changes of government in its sixty-year-old republican history, and Belgium, with its unenviable record of 541 days without a cabinet, in 2010 should have both been ranked as less stable than Egypt, which featured over thirty years of uninterrupted rule by President Hosni Mubarak.

Another approach to political stability draws on the *lack of structural change*, that is, the absence of internally or externally induced change in the basic configuration of a polity. This notion is somewhat problematic in its ramifications, first of all because defining "structural change" is difficult in itself, but also because deep changes are possible in polities that nonetheless retain strong elements of continuity in their constitutional, economic and social configurations.

Most recently, scholars and practitioners seem to have come to terms with the fact that political stability is a multifaceted reality, depending on different determinants, structural as well as contingent ones, ranging from institutional arrangements to the international predicament of a given country. The international consulting firm Eurasia Group, for instance, defines political stability as the capacity of a country's political system to withstand internal or external shocks.

In this sense, a broad operational definition of political stability should take concepts and indicators into account such as *human development* (as measured by the UN

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[3] For a comprehensive (and still relevant) review of the different meanings attached to political stability, see Leon Hurwitz, "Contemporary Approaches to Political Stability", in *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 3, Special Issue on Revolution and Social Change (April 1973), p. 449-463.
[4] Jimmy Carter, "Tehran, Iran Toasts of the President and the Shah at a State Dinner", 31 December 1977, available in *The American Presidency Project*: http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=7080.

Human Development Index); *inequality* (Gini index); *political legitimacy* (i.e. the more or less widespread support for the government, be it democratic or non-democratic); *constraints on regime responsiveness* (i.e. the economic constraints that governments encounter in meeting the requests of their citizens as expressed, for instance, by the total stock of a country's public debt);[5] and *regional/international integration* (meaning, for instance, membership in international and regional organizations or the ratio of total foreign trade over GDP).

Such dimensions and the respective indicators can all be used as analytical tools to reach a clearer understanding of what makes a country more stable than another. For instance, if one looks at the constraints to regime responsiveness as negatively correlated to political stability, it can be argued that one of the reasons behind the Algerian regime's resilience is that the country's financial situation has allowed the government to immediately respond to the economic grievances of the people through measures such as increasing subsidies for staples.[6]

Drawing from the distinctions outlined above, it seems reasonable to hold that up until recently the predominant focus in the Western world (both governmental and non-governmental) was on stability as regime longevity, which was considered as a crucial premise for the ability to pursue Western strategic priorities (from security to the fight against terrorism and illegal migration). This approach, however, was underpinned by assumptions that history proved to be debatable at the very least.

## 2. The US and the EU: different narratives, similar pro-stability policies

In spite of some differences in their approaches, both the US and the EU equated political stability in the MENA region with regime survival. Pre-2011 Arab regimes typically tried to avoid political reform while consolidating state apparatuses (military, security forces, civilian bureaucracies), which served the double purpose of extending state control over society and at the same time creating state-subsidized jobs to fight unemployment, a major source of social unrest.[7] Youth unemployment, in particular, has been widely recognized as a direct cause of social unrest. For instance, in 2010 Egypt's youth unemployment reached the high rate of 23.4% of the workforce.[8]

Entrenched in their view of political stability as essentially resulting from regime longevity, Americans and Europeans alike were unable and unwilling to devise consistent democracy promotion initiatives which would have imperilled precisely regime longevity.

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[5] See Leonardo Morlino, *Changes for Democracy. Actors, Structures, Processes*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011.

[6] Louisa Dris-Aït Hamadouche, "Algeria in the Face of the Arab Spring: Diffuse Pressure and Sustained Resilience", in *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2012*, p. 161-166, http://www.iemed.org/observatori-en/arees-danalisi/arxius-adjunts/anuari/med.2012/hamadouche_en.pdf.

[7] See Paul Rivlin and Shmuel Even, "Political Stability in Arab States: Economic Causes and Consequences", in INSS (formerly JCSS) *Memorandum*, No. 74 (December 2004), http://www.inss.org.il/upload/%28FILE%291193223313.pdf.

[8] International Labour Organization (ILO), "Youth unemployment in the Arab world is a major cause for rebellion", in *ILO Newsroom*, 5 April 2005, http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/features/WCMS_154078/lang--en/index.htm.

US democracy promotion in the MENA region was channelled through USAID (the federal foreign aid agency), the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), and the State Department's Human Rights and Democracy Initiative (HRDF). As for the EU, on top of several initiatives by individual member states, it is worth mentioning the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) and the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). Yet, both the US and the EU consciously subordinated their efforts at democracy promotion to the overarching goal of keeping Arab countries in line with Western policy objectives. As the region's authoritarian regimes generally managed to persuade their Western partners that policy alignment could only be sustained if they remained in power, a short-circuit ensued between Western stability-promotion and democracy-promotion, with the latter generally being sidelined for the sake of the former.

This was reflected, among other things, in the prevalent attitude by Western actors within international fora such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB). The IMF and the WB lending activity is based on the principle of conditionality: the concession of loans is conditional to the implementation of reforms such as restricting budget deficits or decreasing government subsidies, which are likely to cause discontent among the population of beneficiary countries. The economic burden imposed on several Arab regimes by the WB and the IMF's reform agendas was in some cases eased thanks to Western intervention, which resulted in enhanced government stability, while at the same time reducing space for economic reform.

In line with the West's pro-stability attitude, in the last decades the World Bank has actually recorded a general decline in "governance conditionality", i.e. conditionality seeking to promote political reform in the recipient countries.[9] As far as the IMF is concerned, the US sometimes exerted its influence in order to encourage the alignment of loan-recipient countries with its policy objectives. This happened when IMF conditionality could jeopardize the stability of friendly regimes,[10] as in the case of two IMF-Egypt agreements in 1987 and 1991. The US State Department and US Executive Director at the IMF intervened at the time in the negotiation over both agreements to make sure that Egypt could receive a lenient agreement, for fear of triggering political instability.[11]

Relations of EU countries with the Southern Mediterranean regimes followed a similar pattern. Although the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership subordinated economic cooperation to political reform benchmarks, application of this conditionality-based approach was quite lenient. Several European countries cultivated close ties with Northern African regimes, as in the case of the *amitié particulière* between former French President Nicolas Sarkozy and his Tunisian counterpart Zine El-Abidine Ben

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[9] Richard Youngs, "The end of Democratic Conditionality: Good Riddance?", in *FRIDE Working paper*, No. 102 (September 2010), p. 3, http://www.fride.org/publication/806/the-end-of-democratic-conditionality:-good-riddance.
[10] Randall W. Stone, *Controlling Institutions. International Organizations and the Global Economy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 30
[11] Bessma Momani, "American politicization of the International Monetary Fund", in *Review of International Political Economy*, No. 11, Vol. 5 (December 2004), p. 891, http://politicalscience.uwaterloo.ca/~bmomani/documents/RIPE_modified_Article.pdf.

Ali, which at the onset of the uprising in Tunisia turned into a source of embarrassment for the French government,[12] or the close relationship (particularly on tackling irregular immigration) between Italy and Colonel Muammar Gaddafi's Libya, enhanced by the historical 2008 Italian-Libyan Treaty on Friendship, Partnership and Cooperation.[13]

The need for reliable and cooperative counterparts in the Middle East became more urgent than ever in the wake of 9/11, which turned pro-Western Arab autocrats into valuable allies in the fight against Islam-rooted terrorism. Heavy-handed autocrats such as Mubarak in Egypt or Ben Ali in Tunisia were perceived as the only viable alternative to unstable governments prone to take-overs by hostile Islamic forces. By contrast, a growing consensus emerged in both the US and the EU that non-violent Islamist forces should somehow be engaged, as these forces generally had significant popular support. Due to the severe constraints imposed by the imperative of fighting terrorism, however, engagement of Islamist groups and parties was limited to low-profile exchanges between experts and mid-level practitioners.

Arab autocrats were wary even of these limited exchanges, and more often than not paid just lip-service to Western requests that non-violent Islamist forces be allowed greater leeway. Thus, in the West the debate over the relationship between political Islam and democracy ended up being limited to whether or to what extent Islamist forces should be allowed into electoral competition.[14]

Such dilemma is well exemplified by the events linked to the presidential and legislative elections held in Egypt in September and November 2005, respectively, after a change of attitude by the US towards political liberalization epitomized by the famous speech delivered in Cairo in June 2005 by Condoleezza Rice, then US Secretary of State. Rice called for freedom and democracy in MENA countries, and explicitly admitted that for sixty years the US had "pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region here in the Middle East - and we achieved neither".[15] Years later, Rice's words were echoed by President Barack Obama in his 2009 Cairo address,[16] as well as by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton at the Forum for the Future in Doha in early 2011.[17]

As a result of combined US and internal pressures, in 2005 Egyptian President Mubarak proposed to amend the Constitution to allow for Egypt's first ever

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[12] Roula Khalaf and Scheherazade Daneshkhu, "France Regrets Misjudgment over Ben Ali", in *The Financial Times*, 18 January 2011.

[13] Emanuela Paoletti and Ferruccio Pastore, "Sharing the dirty job on the southern front? Italian-Libyan relations on migration and their impact on the European Union", in *IMI Working Papers*, No. 29 (December 2010), http://www.imi.ox.ac.uk/publications/imi-working-papers/wp-29-2010-sharing-the-dirty-job-on-the-southern-front-italian-libyan-relations-on-migration-and-their-impact-on-the-european-union.

[14] Roberto Aliboni and Laura Guazzone, "Democracy in the Arab Countries and the West", in *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Spring 2004), p. 85.

[15] Condoleezza Rice, *Remarks at the American University in Cairo*, Cairo, 20 June 2005, http://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/48328.htm.

[16] Obama stated: "Governments that protect these [human] rights are ultimately more stable, successful and secure". See *Remarks by the President on a New Beginning*, Cairo University, Cairo, 4 June 2009, http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09.

[17] Hillary Clinton, *Remarks at the Forum for the Future: Partnership Dialogue Panel Session*, Doha, 13 January 2011, http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/01/154595.htm.

multicandidate presidential election[18] and relaxed police pressure on the Muslim Brotherhood, which in the following legislative elections won 40 percent of the vote, which meant a fivefold increase in the numbers of seats in the parliament (they won 20 percent of the total seats).[19] The Egyptian regime reacted by taking stiff anti-reform measures, such as postponing local elections and launching arrest campaigns against Muslim Brotherhood affiliates.[20] In spite of its pro-democracy rhetoric, the US turned a blind eye on such measures, clearly demonstrating the prioritization of regime stability over democratic openings.

Such a policy choice was underpinned by a quite widespread belief about the capability of Arab regimes to cling to power at least in the medium term and, possibly, to democratize gradually over time. Such belief seemed to be reflected, for instance, in the fact that US democracy assistance towards MENA countries never lost over time its top-down approach, i.e., an approach focusing on reform of state institutions rather than on the support for civil society.[21]

The same can be said about European democracy assistance.[22] The EU outlined the objective of ensuring a secure and stable neighbourhood when it launched the European Neighbourhood Policy. In the ENP framework, the EU declared its will to address the causes of "political instability, economic vulnerability, institutional deficiencies, conflict and poverty and social exclusion"[23] in neighbouring countries. However, the EU rarely made use of the instruments at its disposal to sanction its neighbourhood's democratic shortcomings.[24] As in the case of 2005 Egypt, where very limited reforms related to judicial independence and press freedom were enacted only to deflect criticism and consolidate state control,[25] democratic reforms in the EU's Arab partners were generally cosmetic rather than substantial in nature. While flows of trade and investment between the EU and Mediterranean countries experienced constant growth, with European foreign direct investment reaching a peak of 15 billion euros in

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[18] Jeremy M. Sharp, "Egypt: 2005 Presidential and Parliamentary Elections", in *CRS Report for Congress*, No. RS22274 (15 January 2006), p. 2, https://opencrs.com/document/RS22274.

[19] "Egypt's Ugly Election", in *The Washington Post*, 10 December 2005, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/12/09/AR2005120901837.html

[20] Noha Antar, "The Muslim Brotherhood's Success in the Legislative Elections in Egypt 2005: Reasons and Implications", in *EuroMeSCo paper*, No. 51 (October 2006), p. 24, http://www.euromesco.net/images/51_eng.pdf.

[21] Daniela Huber, "Democracy Assistance in the Middle East and North Africa: A Comparison of US and EU Policies", in *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (March 2008), p. 43-62, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13629390701864836.

[22] Haizam Amirah-Fernández and Irene Menéndez, "Reform in Comparative Perspective: US and EU Strategies of Democracy Promotion in the MENA Region after 9/11", in *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (December 2009), p. 325-338.

[23] European Commission, *Wider Europe-Neighbourhood: A New Framework for Relations with our Eastern and Southern Neighbours* (COM(2003) 104 final), Brussels, 11 March 2003, p. 6, http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2003:0104:FIN:EN:PDF.

[24] Raffaella A. Del Sarto and Tobias Schumacher, "From EMP to ENP: What's at Stake with the European Neighbourhood Policy towards the Southern Mediterranean?", in *European Foreign Affairs Review*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Spring 2005), p. 22, http://www.ucm.es/info/eurotheo//bibliografia/euromed_delsarto_schumacher.pdf.

[25] See Freedom House, "Egypt", in *Freedom in the World 2007*, http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2007/egypt.

2006,[26] the trend in civil liberties and political rights was, according to Freedom House data, static and in some cases negative (Tunisia, for instance, which had been labelled as "partially free" in 2002, switched to "not free" in 2007).[27] Despite being often referred to as a "normative power",[28] the EU was even less vocal than the US in calling for democracy in the MENA region.

The US and EU policies in favour of political stability across the Mediterranean prior to late 2010 appeared to have hinged on the aforementioned conviction that stability could (and perhaps, pragmatically *should*) be equated with regime survival, as well as the belief that an authoritarian regime could be as durable as a democratic one, at least in the short-medium term, and the idea that a gradual (rather than an abrupt) democratic transition to democracy was possible and desirable in the Arab world. Until the outbreak of protests in December 2010, it was generally thought that hereditary successions would possibly take place in Egypt, Libya and Yemen.[29]

Given these premises, in Western eyes the relationship between democratization and stability could not but manifest itself as a trade-off, exposing the inescapable tension embedded in the Western policies towards the region, between the "desire of democracy" and the "need for stability".[30]

## 3. Explaining Western preference for stability over democracy: political stability assessment

National intelligence agencies as well as think tanks and other non-governmental actors (such as multinational enterprises, banks, consulting firms) regularly perform political stability analysis (as part of country risk analyses) through a number of different techniques and indicators.[31] This notwithstanding, most observers were caught unprepared by the outburst of political protest in Tunisia, and even more so by the events that followed across the entire MENA region. Why?

In order to answer this question, it is necessary to concentrate on whether the instruments to assess political stability on which Western governments tend to rely are premised on acceptable conceptual assumptions, or whether instead the "original sin"

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[26] Eurostat, "European Union-Mediterranean countries: growing trade in services and investment", in *Statistics in Focus*, No. 106 (2008), p. 5, http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_OFFPUB/KS-SF-08-106/EN/KS-SF-08-106-EN.PDF.

[27] Freedom House, "Tunisia", in *Freedom in the World 2007*, http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2007/tunisia.

[28] See for instance Ian Manners, "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?", in *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (June 2002), p. 235-258, http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1468-5965.00353.

[29] Joshua Stacher, "Reinterpreting Authoritarian Power: Syria's Hereditary Succession", in *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (Spring 2011), p. 199.

[30] Shadi Hamid, "The Cairo Conundrum", in *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas*, No. 15 (Winter 2010), p. 34-45, http://www.democracyjournal.org/15/6726.php.

[31] Ranging from simple "check-list" approaches (like in the case of consulting firms such as Political Risk Services Group) to complex, firm-specific algorithms (e.g. energy-sector multinational enterprises such as ENI).

of Western pro-stability policies - in the MENA but also elsewhere - lies with the way political stability is conceptually framed and empirically assessed.

Up to 2010, governments, business and other non-governmental analysts generally focused on some aspects of the general situation of a given country at the expense of others, which instead proved to be crucial in explaining what happened in the MENA countries starting from late December 2010.

As argued above, the Western understanding of political stability across the Mediterranean prior to late 2010 hinged on the assumptions that authoritarian regimes were stable and that gradual democratic transition in the Arab world was possible. Such assumptions, embedded in the mainstream discourse, had relevant consequences when it came to performing the assessment task. Among the several indexes providing country risk ratings, few, if any, considered in 2010 the variable "political regime" to be a possible predictor of instability. Business Environment Risk Intelligence (BERI), a US-based consultancy, for instance, did not take into account the type of political regime in its political risk index, which is meant to measure overall political stability.[32] Interestingly, in some cases authoritarianism was considered to be an element actually *enhancing* stability rather than the other way round. This is the case of the Political Instability Index by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), the risk consultancy of *The Economist* group, which claims to identify and quantify the main social, economic and political factors that are causally associated with political instability. The model factors in variables deemed to be correlated with political instability, namely the level of development as measured by the infant mortality rate; extreme cases of economic or political discrimination against minorities; the degree of political stability of neighbouring countries; ethnic fragmentation; poor governance; a proclivity to labour unrest; the level of provision of public services and state strength, as well as indicators accounting for economic distress.[33] When assessing the political regime component, the EIU adopts a coding scheme based on a classification of political regimes according to its own Index of Democracy: 0 is assigned to "either a full democracy or authoritarian regime"; 2 is assigned to "either a non-consolidated, 'flawed' democracy or a hybrid regime (neither a democracy nor an autocracy)".[34]

By attributing less stability to the so-called hybrid regimes[35] compared with both full democracies and autocracies, the EIU methodology relies on some recent

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[32] See *Business Risk Services User's Guide*, http://www.beri.com/Publications/BRS.aspx.

[33] "The overall index on a scale of 0 (no vulnerability) to 10 (highest vulnerability) has two component indexes - an index of underlying vulnerability and an economic distress index. The overall index is a simple average of the two component indexes. There are 15 indicators in all - 12 for the underlying and 3 for the economic distress inde*x*". See EIU, "Political Instability Index: Vulnerability to social and political unrest", in *ViewsWire News Analysis*, 19 March 2009,
http://viewswire.eiu.com/index.asp?layout=VWArticleVW3&article_id=874361472.

[34] Ibidem.

[35] On hybrid regimes, definable as regimes which are not full autocracies but at the same time cannot be deemed to be full democracies, see Larry Diamond, "Thinking about hybrid regimes", in *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (April 2002), p. 21-35,
http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/bmoraski/Democratization/Diamond_JOD02.pdf; Terry Lynn Karl, "The hybrid regimes of Central America", in *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (July 1995), p. 72-86; and Leonardo Morlino, "Are there hybrid regimes? Or are they just an optical illusion?", in *European Political Science Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (July 2009), p. 273-296.

developments in scholarly studies on the relationship between political regimes and stability.[36] However, although the proposition that hybrid regimes are the most vulnerable seems to be supported by empirical evidence, the relative behaviour of full autocracies or full democracies has not been subject to specific studies. Thus, when it comes to assessing the stability of democratic vis-à-vis authoritarian regimes, the EIU - and many others with it - deems a full democracy and a full autocracy to be equally stable in the short-to medium term. Such a choice, although based on a quite diffused belief about the resilience of authoritarian regimes, seems to have proven flawed in light of the Arab Spring.

While it is certainly true that the relatively small institutional adjustments that take place frequently in democratic contexts are much less likely to occur in authoritarian ones, change in the latter, when it occurs, can be on a much larger scale. This is certainly a major lesson taught by the Arab uprisings, namely that democracy and autocracy cannot be equated when evaluating the degree of political stability of a given country. This equation derives from an oversimplification of reality, lacking a sound empirical foundation and inevitably leading to misjudgements in cross-country comparisons. According to the EIU methodology, for instance, Italy in 2010 scored more than Tunisia in terms of vulnerability to political and social unrest.

An important warning, then, is that a strategic shift of attention is needed from a short-sighted notion of stability as regime survival to the mid- to -long-term sustainability of political regimes.[37] The structural factors that can make autocracies frail are still longing for an in-depth investigation. The once widely held opinion that democracies are more prone to instability, in particular, seems to have lost ground when confronted with empirical data about the resilience of autocratic regimes.[38]

As for sustainability assessment, an interesting starting point would be the empirical analysis of regime responsiveness, that is, the extent to which governments enact policies that correspond to the expectations of citizens and civil society.[39] In this perspective, all issues related to political legitimacy and representation, far from being a purely normative concern, come to the fore as crucially relevant also for stability assessment exercises.


## Conclusion

The Arab Spring has proven that Western expectations concerning the supposed stability of autocratic regimes relied on flawed assessment mechanisms. In particular,

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[36] See in particular Jack A. Goldstone et al., "A Global Model for Forecasting Political Instability", in *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (January 2010), p. 190-208,
http://www.systemicpeace.org/Global%20Model%20for%20Forecasting%20AJPS%202010.pdf.
[37] See Silvia Colombo, "The Southern Mediterranean. Between Changes and Challenges to its Sustainability", in Silvia Colombo and Nathalie Tocci (eds.), "The Challenges of State Sustainability in the Mediterranean", in *IAI Research Papers*, No. 3 (September 2011), p. 15-58,
http://www.iai.it/content.asp?langid=2&contentid=665.
[38] Marc Stier and Robert J. Mundt, *Is Democracy Stable? Compared to What? A Preliminary Exploration*, Paper presented at the 93th Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, 28-31 August 1997, http://www.stier.net/writing/demstab/stability.htm.
[39] See Leonardo Morlino, *Changes for Democracy, cit.*, chapter 7.

the notion of stability as regime survival has turned out to be too simplistic, in that it has been incapable of shedding light on the determinants of long-term political stability. Authoritarian transition, which occurred in several cases in the past decades, was thought to be a viable and likely scenario in countries like Egypt, Libya and Yemen. The Arab Spring is clearly forcing the international community as well as the academy to focus on the question of relative stability of autocracies and democracies, a question which will also be crucial to the future of Western democracy assistance or promotion policies. A crucial field to be explored in this regard concerns regime sustainability. The need to conceive of the nexus between democracy and stability as a mutually reinforcing relationship instead of a trade-off is not merely a matter of normative concern. Rather, it is an issue relevant to the strategic assessment of a given country's political stability, and Western policy-makers as well as intelligence agencies would certainly benefit from a change of perspective in this regard.

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